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**Improvising Business**

**Intuition vs. data: What you know and the records don’t show**

I have committed an act that will likely get me kicked out of the International Association of Folks Who do Speaking and Training: I have stopped using post-session evaluations.

I toyed with discontinuing them for a while, especially after one keynote a few years ago. Two attendees had to leave before my presentation, but they were kind enough to complete their evaluations of my session. This was before I spoke at the conference. One of them rated me 10 points out of 10 in every category. The other gave me fives straight down the sheet. I honestly don’t know which one angered me more, the over-complimentary evaluation or the average one. I actually don’t mind being average in most categories. Driving an average car means that state troopers have their eyes on faster rigs. Being an average size sure comes in handy if you’re in the center seat and your neighbor is, shall we say, above average.

There was also the realization that — just like the rest of the world — I don’t really want comments from other people about how to improve when I’m doing my job. I want comments that will support how I already feel. (I don’t think we all resist change or critique, but rather we are interested in growing when we’re ready.)

The real reason I stopped collecting evaluations was that I never learned anything that intuition didn’t tell me in the first place. In fact, intuition was usually more accurate than the attendees’ opinions anyway. I have received comments like, “This is the best workshop I have ever attended!” when I knew that I was not at my best that day. Those mediocre workshops being “the best they have ever had” makes me wonder what kind of torture the employees are usually subjected to.

I also have received comments like, “This was a compleat waste of time!” after delivering a very powerful session. (And yes, the spelling was theirs.)

So I’ve learned to trust my intuition. If only more people could do the same.

I have had a number of workshops recently where we needed to improve the communication skills of the staff. One exercise deals with how someone leading an interaction can guide it to a conclusion that is good for both parties.

In workshops, I explain that a human being will only feel one of two emotions when in your presence; nervousness or comfort. All the other complex emotions we feel really stem from those two. If you make me nervous, I won’t like you, I won’t trust you and I won’t believe what you tell me. If you make me feel comfortable, I like you, trust you and want to work with you again.

The exercise I spoke of is very difficult so there is a high risk of both partners feeling nervous. I tell people that, at the end of the exercise, I will ask the leader of each interaction whether their partner was comfortable or nervous; and the leaders must not only be able to tell me which is the case, but they should know why.

At the end of the exercise, only a few people can tell me with certainty what their partner’s emotional state was. Those that can’t are usually nervous themselves, which blocks the ability to listen and observe others. At a workshop I conducted a few days ago, there was a woman who knew definitively that her partner was in a comfortable state of mind. When I asked how she knew, the woman said, “I don’t know exactly how I know. I could just tell intuitively.”

There were a number of people at the workshop who dismissed her assessment as fluff. “How can you be sure if you don’t have data to back it up?” they demanded. Coincidentally, those were the same people who made their own partners nervous and frustrated.

Those who refuse to believe that a sixth sense, an intuitive intelligence, can be as accurate as date-driven reports place so much importance on numbers that they don’t realize they missed the point of the report in the first place.

In his book, A Whole New Mind, Daniel Pink states it best by saying our left brain (the hemisphere most responsible for process thinking) has been so highly prized by our society that the right brain (the hemisphere responsible for creativity, humor, communication skills and intuition) has been considered fluffy and unimportant. Pink states that, because our society has largely relied on agriculture, manufacturing and computers, leaders in business haven’t seen much need for soft skills. However, anyone who has tried learning a soft skill like public speaking knows there is nothing soft about the right brain.

Furthermore, with jobs either moving overseas to cheaper labor markets or being taken over by automation and computers, the skills that will keep an American worker competitive are largely intuitive. So will managers need to be as comfortable asking how their staff feels about an idea as much as they ask what the staff can prove? This may fly in the face of programs like Design for Six Sigma, but the answer is yes. And anyone who has taken a college course in statistics knows that going strictly by the numbers will produce just as flawed an outcome as a “pick a hand, any hand” approach.

In his book, Social Intelligence, Daniel Goleman points out that people have evolved with very sensitive neural feelers. As social creatures, humans have evolved with the necessary ability to instantly discern whether we can trust another individual. This feeling exists at a neural level, what we call a gut feeling. Too often, however, our intellect talks us out of trusting our gut, which explains why so many women agree to a second date when their gut tells them the first one was a disaster. It is usually months later that we say to ourselves, “I knew it all along.”

So I have resolved to not only ask what people’s intuition tells them, but to trust the answer they give me. It won’t be accurate every time, but it can’t be any worse than what the statistics have given us. I don’t know, I just have a feeling.

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